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THE INJUSTICE OF THE FREE HIGH SCHOOL TO THE WAGE-EARNING CLASSES

By

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THE INJUSTICE OF THE FREE HIGH SCHOOL TO THE WAGE-EARNING CLASSES

THE tower of the College of the City of New York which one sees from the train, when it crosses the Harlem River, is a constant symbol of one of the most unjust forms of taxation of the working classes in the United States. Its counterpart is visible in many cities in the shape of extravagant and costly free high-school buildings, over whose portals the proper inscription would be as follows, *viz.*, "A Monument of Injustice to the Wage-earning Classes," since they are compelled to pay for what only a very small fraction can enjoy. All buildings of this type represent the most unjust type of "dead-beat socialism," since they represent compulsory charity, wrung from the pockets of wage-earners by the ruthless hand of the state, chiefly for the benefit of a favored few of the wealthier classes.

The famous words of Macbeth,

- Can such things be,
And over come us like a summer's cloud,
Without our especial wonder?

are well illustrated in the steady and unchallenged growth of this sinister form of unjust taxation of the working classes. Fortunately at last the consciences of some friends of the working classes have been touched by the study of this evil, and the beginnings of efforts at reform show the truth of Lincoln's famous saying "You can fool all of the people some of the time, and some of the people all of the time, but not all of the people all of the time." The honor and credit for the first recent effort to right this wrong belongs to The Connecticut State Board of Education for 1913. On page

12 of their report for the years 1912-1913 are found these modest, true and significant words.

From the foregoing statistics it appears that in Connecticut upon 7 per cent. of the children was spent 20 per cent. of the total cost of the public schools.

To the end that this disparity of expenses and accomplishment may be somewhat relieved, high schools should be maintained in part at least by tuition fees. The money thus released will be devoted to the useful education of the vast number of those whose school life ends at fourteen.

Similarly these important words from the inaugural message of Governor Philipp of Wisconsin seem to me unquestionably true.

The common schools of the state, which are the schools of the masses, do not receive their fair proportion of all the money available for educational purposes. The result is that we are building our educational system from the top down, instead of from the bottom up. This system is wrong and needs to be corrected in the interest of the people.

Unquestionably the much-lauded "Wisconsin Idea" leaves much to be desired in the way of justice to the working classes. That in that state as in many other states the common schools, or the "grades" as they are sometimes called, constitute the neglected and "sweated" Cinderella of the system of public education will appear from the following quotation from a Wisconsin paper, *viz.*:

We have many thousands of workingmen and farmers in Wisconsin who can not afford to send their sons to the university, but who are paying taxes and helping to educate the sons of men of

other states better situated financially than they are.

Still another quotation from an address by Mr. M. P. Shawkey, state superintendent of schools for West Virginia, will show a side of this iniquitous system that is very rarely thought of. The wrong to the wage earner is double fold. Each year the state grabs him by the throat and takes from his pocket some of his earnings to spend chiefly on a favored few, chiefly the children of the wealthier classes, while under a more just and equitable system, this money would be spent on the lower schools, where the children of the working classes in most cases finish their education. These are Superintendent Sharkey's words:

On the basis of justice every child enumerated has a right to as large a share of the state fund as any other child, on the basis of equity the more needy should have the greater share and on the basis of expediency the especially deserving should have a special allowance.

We must not overlook the fact, however, that the principle of a subsidy is hard to justify. It may easily work wrongs. Every dollar of subsidy given to the high school takes its pence from the starving district that can't maintain its own elementary grades. The subsidy tends to make "the rich richer and the poor poorer," to quote a popular phrase from the political stump speaker. How many dollars of subsidy is it wise to grant even to the most deserving under these conditions?

Such keen consideration of the justice of the treatment of the working classes under the present unjust system is rare to find in a high official of the public school system, and does great honor to the state superintendent of West Virginia. Compare his breadth of view and sympathy with the needs and rights of the working classes with the opposite aristocratic view of Mr. David Snedden, revealed in the article "High Schools—New and Old" in a recent number of *SCHOOL AND SOCIETY*. He is the state superintendent of Massachusetts, a state thoroughly permeated in the realm of education with the demoralizing and perniciously unjust doctrine of "dead-beat socialism." He apparently thinks that public funds come from the clouds like rain and are to be spent lavishly and extravagantly for the special benefit of a small, favored portion of the

wealthier classes, while the working classes with their children are toiling for the hard-earned money that fills up the reservoir of public moneys, which he is ready to spend so recklessly.

Any honest and careful thinker, familiar with the incidence of taxation, the organization of public education and municipal administration, who may be skeptical about the soundness of my contentions, will soon convince himself that I am right, if he will think himself through in an honest answer to the following questions. My argument in support of their soundness will be put in brief answers to these questions, so that if my argument is unsound at any point, the fallacies may easily be exposed by my critics.

1. How much of the money from the town or city treasury should be spent on the public schools?

New Haven, Conn., spends a little more than 33 per cent., almost as much as it spends on public works, police and fire protection, charities and corrections. This is a fairly generous allowance.

2. What proportion of the children of any city in any one year are found in the high school or are graduated from the high school, as compared with the number found in the lower schools or those who are graduated from the grammar schools? The answer of course to this double question varies very much with the city. In wealthy residential cities like Brookline or Newton in Massachusetts the proportion of pupils or graduates in the high school is much greater than in industrial cities like Fall River, Mass., or Bridgeport, Conn., chiefly inhabited by the working classes. To get a reasonably satisfactory answer I shall quote two recent utterances on this point from widely different sources, which may be taken as approximately correct.

The first is the remark of the president of B. Altman & Co., of New York City, viz.:

The mistaken idea of the public school at present is to fit the children for the high school, and those of the high school for college. Less than five per cent. of all children who enter the public schools ever go through the high schools.

The other is the utterance of the chief teacher of science in the Gary public schools, which is as follows:

To put off the study of the sciences until the high school grades is not only unnatural, but it is undemocratic as well, because only one child out of every fourteen entering the public schools is graduated from the high school. It is undemocratic for the public school to be devoting the greater part of its energy to this one boy or girl, when it should be giving the best possible start in life to the other thirteen.

In order to have the average reader clearly visualize this tragic and pathetic fact, I summarize the condition of affairs in New Haven, Conn., a university city. In 1913, there were 30,000 children in the public and private schools of the city. In the first five grades of the public-school system there was an average of 3,000 pupils in each grade. In the graduating class of the high school there were about 500. Evidently there is a large army of the missing, who have fallen out by the way in the long march from the kindergarten to graduation day. Who are the missing and where are they now? Are they the children of the wage-earning or the wealthier classes? Are they lolling at home or have they entered on life's hard struggle? The answer to these questions any one may find for himself, if he stand at the entrance to a great factory or large department store, when the day's work is over and asks himself how many in that surging crowd are not over 20 years of age, and are graduates of the high school.

3. What is the cost per pupil for a high-school pupil as compared with the cost of the education of a pupil in the lower school or grades, as they are often called?

The answer to this question also varies very much with different localities and conditions. I know of a very few cities where the cost per pupil for high-school education does not greatly exceed the cost of grammar-school education in the same city. But such instances are extremely rare. In many cities the cost of the higher education per pupil is twice, three times and sometimes four times that of education in the grades, where the vast majority of the children of the wage-earning

classes finish their formal education. The reason for this is easy to seek. The high-school teachers receive much higher salaries, have to teach much smaller classes, more expensive and more numerous text-books are required, while the lavish and extravagant expenditure for building sites, buildings and equipment, laboratories, recitation rooms and spacious gymnasiums for temporary use enormously increases the cost of this institution for the favored few. The former superintendent of schools of Newton, Mass., in his most admirable reports very properly said:

It is the high school department that is mainly responsible for the recent large gross increase in the cost of the schools. It is in this department that the per-pupil cost has increased by leaps and bounds.

Two cities on the Connecticut River, of about the same population and similar social conditions, Springfield, Mass., and Hartford, Conn., illustrate how in the last twenty-five years the working classes of those cities have been wronged and "sweated" by extravagant high-school expenditure. Their total population and school population are about the same, but the nominal assessed valuation of property in Springfield is considerably more than that in Hartford. During the last twenty-five years both these cities have sunk from one and a half to two millions of dollars in high-school buildings, plant and equipment, when the number of pupils in the high school ranged about 2,000. New Haven, Conn., on the contrary, has over 3,000 in its high school, and yet, by wise administration, the common capital invested in a satisfactory building and plant is \$600,000. All estimates of per-pupil cost in school reports have this serious defect, which would not be tolerated for a moment in similar estimates in business life. They do not include any item for rent or interest on capital invested and allowance for depreciation. If the capital invested by Springfield be taken as two millions, on a four per cent. basis, she is paying an annual rent of \$80,000 per year merely for high-school pupils, or \$40 per pupil in average attendance. As in 1914 the total number of graduates was only 300 in the high school, it must be very clear that the wastage

in high-school pupils there is very great, and the cost of the finished product of high-school education to the wage-earners of the city comes very high. It would seem to be quite certain that in the two cities I have taken as examples, if rent is charged in the cost as it ought to be, the cost per high-school pupil is at least four times the cost per pupil in the lower grades. In regard to these two cities the words of Superintendent Spalding, now of Minneapolis, which I have quoted above with regard to Newton are certainly true.

4. What is the cost per pupil place of an average high-school building as compared with the cost of a grammar-school building?

It is always much greater, but the proportion varies with the locality and the elasticity of conscience of those who determine the expenditure. A single example from Springfield will illustrate this. A high-school building with seats and desks for 800 pupils cost \$475,000, while a grammar school built twelve years later for 600 pupils cost \$100,000. This is naturally the case from the difference of character of these two features of our public-school system. In the grammar schools there is practically but one course for all scholars. In the high schools larger or smaller extensions of the elective system prevail. In Springfield, when a pupil enters the high school, he has the opportunity to choose from eight different courses. This requires many recitation rooms, laboratories, libraries, gymnasiums, workshops, etc., which all entail very great increase of public money, locked up permanently in wood, steel, brick and mortar, at the very time when the proportion of the working classes who get any direct or personal benefit from such expenditure of their money is dwindling almost to nothing. It is clear then both from the point of view of current expenses involved in teachers' wages and likewise of permanent capital investment, that the favored few in the high school receive an undue proportion of the money of the taxpayers in comparison with the many children of the working classes who never enter the high school or waste a year of unprofitable study in the lowest class of that institution. This is the reason why, in the words of the Connecticut State

Board of Education, "upon 7 per cent. of the children registered in the public schools was expended 20 per cent. of the total cost of the public schools."

5. What is the effect upon the lower schools of the public-school system of maintaining an expensive free high school?

It makes these lower schools the Cinderella of the system, neglected, "sweated," denied their proper share of sustenance and nourishment. The great cost of high-school instruction sucks away from the lower schools so much life-blood in the shape of money, which if spent upon these lower schools in the way of increasing the number of teachers and thereby lessening the number of pupils per teacher, would greatly increase their efficiency and value to the community, for in these schools the large majority of the children of the wage earners finish their education, before they go to work to earn their own living. Most of these children between the ages of fifteen and nineteen are found laboring in factory, store, counting room, domestic service or out of doors, and not in the high-school building. It is the hard necessity of life with them. But notwithstanding that, under the present system, the relentless hand of the state grips each year the throats of their parents, and takes from them a portion of their earnings for the entire support of an expensive institution which ministers chiefly to a favored and wealthier few. The teachers in the lower schools, while receiving only one half or two thirds of the salary paid to high-school teachers, are usually required to care for and teach from forty-five to fifty scholars in a session room. The average number aimed at in a class in a high school is twenty-five. It is clear that in the lower schools a backward scholar can not receive the special attention desirable in many cases, under such circumstances, and consequently their preparation for the work of active life is much more meager and imperfect than it ought to be.

6. Who gets the full benefit from a free high school and who pays the expense of it?

The small portion of any community that gets the full benefit will be readily seen from a recent utterance of Mayor Mitchell with re-

gard to the situation in the great metropolis.

There are in the public schools of Greater New York 661,000 children. Out of this large number only 41,000 qualified for, and 23,000 actually entered the high schools. In the fourth year of the course before graduation, only 4,079 survived.

Probably not fifty per cent. of these survivors are the children of wage-earners, and this little group form probably less than three per cent. of the children of the wage-earning classes of the age of nineteen. A doughty defender of the free high school of a manufacturing town proudly pointed to the fact that in the graduating class of the school were seven children of mill operatives, but concealed the fact that in that same town there were probably 2,000 mill operatives, bearing the burden of taxation all the time. This is a good example of the patent fallacies and sophistries with which the arguments of defenders of the present iniquitous system are permeated. The question at issue is not how many of the graduating class in any high school are children of wage-earners, but how many wage-earners, who pay taxes directly or indirectly, have children in the graduating class of any high school. It is quite possible that in a graduating class of 300 in a city 150 might be children of wage-earners, viz., those whose regular yearly income is not more than \$1,200, and yet these 150 would constitute less than three per cent. of the children of the wage-earners, between the ages of eighteen and twenty.

The answer to the second part of this question illustrates admirably another common fallacy among defenders of the free high school. They maintain that only those who pay taxes directly to the collector of taxes are the taxpayers of the city, viz., that only owners of property really pay taxes upon it. It is a common truism among real-estate men and students of taxation that in the last instance, the occupier of property who pays rent upon it, in most cases pays the taxes on that property. Hence all who pay rent on houses which they do not own, as well as those who live in their own houses constitute the taxpayers of a city, and a large percentage of these in most cities are the wage-earners or working classes, with

an average daily wage, when they are at work, of between \$2.00 and \$4.00 per day. In the words of the *New York Sun*,

Tenants of property in many cases fail to understand to what extent the oppressive load of taxation is passed on to them, and in their ignorance conceive of themselves as having no interest in economy. Yet it is the case that every citizen of the town pays his share of the taxes, although he may be ignorant of the fact.

All occupiers of property in a city pay the expenses of the high school at a steadily increasing rate for all their lives. Those who get the benefit of the large expenditure for high schools at any one time are only a small portion of the community. They are chiefly those parents who can afford to support their children during the ages from fifteen to nineteen, viz., families where the annual income runs from \$1,200 to \$3,000 and upward. "We are getting more than we pay for," was the utterance of a "dead-beat Socialist" who was championing the free high school in a city of 150,000 inhabitants. That sentence finely illustrates the common sophistry by which the defenders of the free high school either hoodwink themselves or try to hoodwink others. The "we" in the first case referred to the 500 parents of the graduates each year, or the 2,500 parents of pupils in the school, while "we" in the second case referred to the 30,000 taxpayers, a large majority of whom were wage-earners.

7. What sound objection can there be to a law, enacting, as an act of justice to the wage-earning classes, that in public secondary education, as in the municipal supply of water, the person especially benefited shall pay a portion of the expense out of his own pocket, instead of having it all paid for out of the common treasury?

No single sound objection can be made to such a law, for it is a step in the right direction for relieving the wage-earner from unjust taxation and for righting an outrageous wrong. It is wholly in line with that noble utterance of the late Governor Altgeld, on the essential injustice and civic corruption, wrought by "giving something for nothing." It simply establishes with regard to the high school, the

universal principle that has always prevailed with regard to the municipal supply of water, a necessary of life, or with regard to trolley transportation, whether that be through public or private ownership, or the post office or the sewerage of a city.

Now that the gross injustice of the present vicious system of the free high school to the working classes has been clearly outlined, it remains to consider the best remedy by which this injustice can be lessened if not wholly removed. It is to the credit of the Connecticut State Board of Education for 1913 that they not only blazed the way for a new era of justice to all citizens by showing the inherent injustice of the present system of "dead-beat socialism" in education, but also pointed out an adequate remedy. This wrong of unjust taxation of the working classes is practically confined to the United States. It is rarely to be found in any other country of the world. This remedy which has been proposed in Connecticut prevails almost everywhere else. It places some of the burden of secondary and higher education on those who get the benefit instead of making all taxpayers carry the whole burden. The State Board of Education of Connecticut in 1913 unanimously introduced a bill into the state legislature providing that all high-school pupils in the state should pay a tuition fee of ten dollars per year, or at the rate of 25 cents per week during a school year of 40 weeks. This requirement would have been of course no serious burden to any parent able to support his child through the high school. But the vicious spirit of dead-beat socialism has so demoralized civic virtue and character in the state that the bill was bitterly opposed, especially by some high-school teachers and principals, from most selfish motives, who stupidly thought that some of them would lose their jobs, if the bill should become a law, and so discreditably lobbied against it. It was never reported from the committee on education to the legislature.

Two similar bills, more carefully drawn and more elaborate in character, have been introduced into the legislature of 1915, and it is a very encouraging fact that the sentiment in favor of the reform both in the legislature and

outside of it has perceptibly grown in two years. Though there was a considerable minority of the committee on education in favor of the principle, embodied in the bills, on the last day before the adjournment of the legislature, they were unfavorably reported to the main body without any definite reasons, and the report was approved. These two bills in their main features were alike. They provided that a tuition fee of not less than twenty and not more than forty dollars per year should be required of all pupils in high schools, with the exception that no pupil should be required to pay tuition before the age of fourteen, the time when compulsory education ceases in Connecticut. A very decided improvement over the bill of 1913 is found in the fact that the amount of money thus raised by tuition fees was all to be spent in improving the teaching in the grades by supplying additional teachers, and thus lessening the number of pupils for whose training one teacher is responsible. Under this law the New Haven Board of Education would have been able to place without any additional taxation at least one hundred extra teachers in the schools below the high schools, and thus reduce the average number of pupils to teachers from 45 to 35 nearly. What a blessing that would be to the children of the wage-earning classes and to the hard-working teachers of the grammar grades, who now with 45 to 50 pupils under them in one session room, do their important work under much more difficult conditions than the high-school teachers, who on the average receive much more pay. It was also provided that this additional amount should be in addition to an expenditure of at least thirty dollars per pupil in the public grammar schools. It will be evident then that under such a law the lower schools in the cities of Connecticut would be far better staffed with teachers than ever before in their history, and much better than in most of the cities of the United States. Such apportionment of public monies will give more money to the lower schools for their crying needs, and the small proportion of the patrons of the high schools, who chiefly get the benefit from these extravagant institutions, will have to pay out of their own pockets a part of the cost of public

secondary education as they ought to do. The Wisconsin State High School at Madison, Wisconsin, and the great state universities of Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota apply this principle in very moderate fashion to all their pupils, so that no one gets instruction there as a matriculated student unless he pays out of his own pocket some portion of the cost, although at present the portion that he pays is too small. It should be the same with all high schools throughout the United States. This is but common justice and fairness to those whose hard life it is to toil for a moderate daily or weekly wage. The only practical difference between the two bills is that in one case the law requiring tuition of high-school pupils was made applicable to all high schools, while in the other case it applied only to those cities and towns where the administration of high schools was so extravagant that the cost of education per pupil in the high school was more than twice the cost of education per pupil in the lower schools, where the large majority of the children of the working classes finish their education. Besides its other merits such a law would constitute a most admirable check on extravagant high-school administration, which is such an unjust and crying evil in many cities of the United States. This of course is due to the fact that public officials in this country who control public expenditure rarely have that noble virtue, conspicuous in Gladstone, according to Lord Bryce, the habit of being more careful in the expenditure of the money of his fellow citizens than in spending his own.

The general theory on which these bills, imposing high-school tuition fees, were framed followed the sound principle once laid down by the Right Hon. John Burns, the ablest labor leader whom the wage-earners of England ever had. He stated the just, sound and proper doctrine of taxation in something like the following words:

Whenever the government discharges a function for the benefit of the people, those who receive a specially measurable benefit from the discharge of that function should be made to pay by way of fees into the common treasury, so far as possible, part of or the whole of the proportional cost, so that the entire cost or a large portion of it shall not fall on the common treasury.

This is the sound and just doctrine of what may be called "Dutch-treat socialism," as distinguished from "dead-beat socialism," with which the United States is unfortunately afflicted more than most countries.

In the beginning of this article I alluded to the City College of New York City as a striking symbol of most unjust and indefensible taxation of the working classes, and as I close I wish to refer to it again. It represents a capital investment of seven millions of dollars, taken straight out of the pockets of the citizens of the metropolis by the ruthless hand of the state, and an annual expenditure of \$700,000, secured in the same way. Yet it sends forth barely 200 graduates a year, all of whom could have received their higher education at other colleges in Greater New York without any expense to the common treasury. Probably the cost of producing a graduate of this institution is exceeded by few institutions in the United States. Yet at this very time the city is groaning under heavy taxation, frantic protests against an additional state tax are made, and the lower schools on which these seven millions ought rightly to have been expended are cramped and enfeebled in giving a common-school education to the children of the working classes. The school authorities have almost given up the idea of having a desk and seat for every scholar registered, and doubt whether with the rapid growth of population, the evil of the part time system can ever be abolished in the grades. At the present time there are 36,000 more children than can satisfactorily be accommodated at one time.

The free-high-school system, as it exists in the United States to-day, is unjust robbery of the working classes under the form of lawful taxation. The injustice of it is veiled from the average man because he can not easily visualize an economic fact, because of the selfishness infused into the veins of the body politic by the virus of dead-beat socialism, and by the subtle deception resulting from the incidence of taxation. The ideal reform for this injustice would be to treat public secondary education as the municipal supply of water is treated, namely to place it on a self-supporting basis. In that case all the public appro-

priations for education would all be spent on the common schools, below the high school. If there were in every state constitution in this country a provision to that effect, it would be a tremendous gain to every community, and especially to the working classes who form so large a majority of the tax-paying classes in every community. But ideals of justice in this imperfect world we may heartily strive for, but must not expect soon to realize. What practical end then should the earnest citizen, who believes in justice to the toiler, set before him as the goal of his conscientious endeavor? It is this, that the cost per pupil in the high school, paid for by the common treasury, should never be greater than the cost per pupil of those in the lower schools, where education is largely compulsory, which is paid for by public taxation. The greater the difference be-

tween the cost per pupil of high-school education, paid for out of the common treasury, and the cost of grammar-school education, paid for in the same way, the greater the injustice that is done to the working classes, and the more indefensible the wrong done to their children. The more we lessen the difference between the cost of the two kinds of education by insisting on special contributions from the favored wealthier classes, by so much we lessen the injustice of the present system and benefit the children of the working classes. That should be the ideal of noble justice towards which we should strive. Every citizen with the spirit of Abou Ben Adhem in his veins should be ready to do all he can with all his might to bring about this reform.

GEORGE L. FOX
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